

Night Train for Lovers and Thieves

* On the night-train for lovers and heart-stealers

Watching the fantastic footage of the Guca Festival ("Network Medien DVD FiestaMania":redaxo://160) – especially the rip-roaring jam sessions on the fringe of the official performances – festival organiser Ilija Stankovic and Network Medien producer Christian Scholze came up with the idea of creating a space where the energy and exuberance of these powerful musical get-togethers could be given free rein beyond the framework of the actual competition. So here, on the one hand, was a festival organiser who had always wanted to bring a greater sense of togetherness to the diversity of the Guca competition and, on the other, a record company chief constantly in search of new boundaries to cross. Two men with one shared dream – and it came true.

Ekrem Sajdic, the leading authority and oldest band leader among the trumpet players of Guca, was no less enthusiastic. For him, the enormous sensual power of the musical spirit is something that cannot be captured in a sound-proofed studio. He has always felt that music is far more than just a sequence of sounds: it is an expression of life itself. All three felt that it was time to counter the ubiquitous clichés of bland common-time rhythms by showcasing some of the deeper-rooted ancient rituals of Balkan music – the only way to convey and understand the true emotional depth and passion of this culture. In the impoverished south of Serbia, music is a way of defying the hardships of life.

Following Ekrem's first CD, it is to be hoped that the attention of an international audience will be drawn to the difficult situation in this crisis-ridden region. The musicians are not playing for fame and fortune; they are playing, in these utterly magical recordings, against ignorance and forgetting. It all happened in the little village of Vransjka Banja near the border with Kosovo. Practically everyone here is a musician, and no matter where you are, you can almost always hear music coming from at least three different directions. So choosing the musicians for this project was no easy task. At first, a few band leaders were invited to play with Ekrem's band, but then everybody wanted to come along and join in. More and more complete ensembles kept turning up with their instruments. Nothing, not even snowbound roads and plummeting temperatures, could keep them at home. The session was held in a nineteenth century hotel – the only building big enough to accommodate so many musicians. The dining room was turned into a recording studio. Resourceful local women rustled up meals for us and the tradesmen renovating the hotel downed tools to share their slivovitz with us. Outside, the shells of cluster bombs still lay scattered. Inside, the spirits of ancient Serbian kings seemed to come alive and enjoy the warm atmosphere. This is one building that is actually heated by the nearby thermal springs – a source of alternative energy still being largely wasted in spite of urgent calls, and even protests, for it to be harnessed. But here, in a thick cloud of cigarette smoke, among mountains of empty bottles, there is little room for political correctness. Local restaurants support our musical project with copious quantities of cevapcici and other delicacies, and the smell of pickled cabbage wafts around the recording sessions. Even the hotel bar stays open to keep us supplied with drinks while we work late into the night. The moon and Saturn are in the right constellation. Proud to be among the chosen ones, the musicians refuse to accept any further payment once the budget has run out – a humbling gesture in a region with more than 50% unemployment.

The project takes on a dynamic of its own as the whole place embraces this remarkable musical experience. The musicians are completely devoted to the task. They play as though their lives depended on it. When it proves unfeasible to repeat individual recordings, new ideas start coming thick and fast: little musical flourishes woven into witty and tantalising passages brighten the room with myriad tonal hues. Everyone senses that something extraordinary is happening. Participants and visitors alike stay for days and nights on end. We are fuelled by a constant stream of Turkish coffee. Gypsy women send their children back and forth to bring us cakes, toothbrushes, clean clothes – and the world outside is all but forgotten. "Hot Water Festival", recorded in two sessions, is probably the longest piece in the history of Gypsy music: a 32-minute marathon weaving together the most unlikely combination of melodies that are nevertheless rooted in one and the same ancient tradition.

This musical epiphany proves yet again just how brilliantly the Gypsies can mediate between different cultures. Even the politicians present were rendered speechless – completely carried away by this musical catharsis in which rhythms and melodies are brought together with an unfettered freedom that is quite simply irresistible. National animosities are swept aside with an ease that no politician or paper treaty could ever achieve. This is the kind of universal freedom that everyone can understand and celebrate. The rousing Hot Water Festival track in all its complex virtuosity is embedded among heart-

rending ballads, creating a contrast that mirrors the extremes of the Balkan soul: ecstatic joy and plaintive yearning.

Admittedly, the recording process was something of a risk, because the musicians did not know which artists would be joining them and it was not always easy for them to set aside their musical rivalry. Time and again, they called for specific directions so that they could show off their skills with even greater virtuosity. A freely improvised jam session on this scale was unfamiliar territory. At first, there were ideas of where they should be heading, but in the end, the journey itself became the destination. Everything seemed to start out quite simply, with the occasional sudden solo or ecstatic outburst, fading into a gentle lament. But, quite unforeseeably, a musical atmosphere built up that was charged with excitement in this alternation between psychedelic trance, free improvisation and age-old tradition. An exhilarating, impassioned outpouring of ideas welled into an ocean of brass sounds on which the old hotel and all those in it sailed away from the murky shores of reality to a world where the universal truth of human kinship reigns.

The test recordings, when nobody except Ekrem Sajdic had any idea what might come of it all, were pure dynamite. Not one of the tracks on this album had to be recorded a second time. All the constraints of strict musical arrangements were abandoned; the pleasingly idiosyncratic little "imperfections" of Roma music were embraced and there was a real sense of questing for originality and edginess. This was music that went beyond the bounds of the traditional Guca Festival. Nobody was fighting for first place in a solo performance. Bass and tenor tubas shared their solos. Everyone was working together to get the best musical sound and there was no competition for the Golden Trumpet. Freestyle took precedence over rules and regulations.

Encouraged and exhilarated, we posted this musical party on the web. Many musicians from all over the world suddenly felt inspired to send us their own suggestions and ideas. First there was a group of ten Rastafarians from Trinidad, headed by Gerald and David Achee from New York. Then we heard from Gurdial Singh Namdhari, a Punjabi sitar player. A group from Persepolis got in touch, as did a frame-drum percussionist from Haifa, and Irish and American musicians sent in their own recordings. Various instrumentalists from Croatia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina rounded off this collection of recordings from no fewer than fifteen countries. Finally, senior politicians from Vranje invited us to a "First Hot Springs Jam Session", as an antidote to Serbia's social crises, as a sign and a call to harness the sustainable natural energy of the thermal springs instead of destroying the region's forests.

Thanks to all those people whose boundless imagination and energy made us feel like one big musical family! This music is not for those who steal our hearts, for – in the bigger scheme of things – this planet needs us all as lovers. Ilija Stankovic